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ABSTRACT

The document presents a report of the conference "Access to Continuing Education," held at Oxford University, July 1-3, 1975. It is based upon a reading of documents provided to conference participants; on interviews and conversations with a number of participants, organizers, and attendants at the conference; and a review of documents chronicling the development of the thinking of the conference organizers. The primary goal of the conference was to encourage strategies that might implement Russell Report's call for "the systematic expansion of the active areas of adult education into those parts of the population at present untouched. Despite the seriousness of the questioning of assumptions at the conference, the atmosphere in Britain today clearly threatens liberal adult education. British adult education, one of the last bastions of liberal adult education in Europe, is likely gradually to become mixed with a vocational and credentialing orientation that may sour and overwhelm the non-credit, non-examinable, liberal aspect. An important clue as to whether British adult education may become an influence toward the realization of a "1984" society will be the published report by the organizers of the "Access to Continuing Education" conference. (Author/LH)

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Access to Continuing Education: For Good or Ill?

by

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This report of the important "Access to Continuing Education" conference at Oxford University on July 1, 2, and 3, 1975, is based on a reading of all documents provided to conference participants, on interviews and conversations with a number of participants in and organizers of the conference, attendance at the conference, and a review of documents chronicling the development of the thinking of the conference organizers. The European adult education context is based on a six month study in West Germany and on conversations with European colleagues regarding adult education in Europe generally.

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British adult educators had the opportunity this past summer to jump on the bandwagon of lifelong or recurrent education, a bandwagon that's been careening through Europe and North America in recent years. Recurrent education and lifelong education have been two of the key slogans behind which advocates have been attempting with some success to advance the cause of adult education in the Western industrialized democracies. The opportunity for Britons to join the effort was offered by a conference at Oxford University dedicated to expanding "Access to Continuing Education." Whether adult educators in Britain are prepared to jump aboard was not immediately evident.

Impetus for the meeting came from the Open University. Some staff members there had expressed concern that "disadvantaged" people were failing to participate in the O.U. in the numbers the staff members desired. They wanted more involvement of poor people, women, people of rural background, and from people lacking much experience in schooling. The whole of British adult education, of course, tended to attract a largely middle class clientele, with a sprinkling of upwardly mobile people with working class parents and a small number of workers headed for leadership roles within the labour movement. Recognizing that their own concern for increased access to adult education was widespread among theorists and practitioners in the field, the conference planners at the Open University broadened their scope and invited colleagues from many areas of adult education.

The "Access to Continuing Education" conference rejected the concept that adult education could reach only a minority and that this minority could "leaven the lump." This was defined as an elitist concept. To "enlighten" a minority was insufficient; such enlightenment was to be extended

to the entire citizenry. The primary goal of the conference was to encourage strategies that might implement the prestigious Russell Report's call for "the systematic expansion of the active areas of adult education into those parts of the population at present untouched."

The steering committee of the conference decided that it would be necessary, in order to expand access, to facilitate a change in the British philosophy of education for adults. To enhance the possibilities for this change, the committee produced a series of terms with careful definitions which it mailed to participants. The committee excluded the term, adult education, as being both too explicit and too vague. It was too explicit because in England adult education means liberal, non-vocational, non-examinable, non-credit education which eschews training and certification. It was too vague because such adult education tends to merge at the edges with training. What is "liberal" to most might be "training" to another. Although Britain had lived fairly effectively with the education-training dichotomy since 1919, conference planners felt a change was needed. The steering committee named Stuart Maclure of the Times Educational Supplement to write a report of the conference that would indeed facilitate a change in the British philosophy of education for adults.

The keynote speaker set a tone well calculated to shake the foundations of administrators of liberal adult education. He was Gosta Rehn, a professor at the University of Stockholm. Rehn spoke highly of the Swedish pattern where youth education and adult education are dealt with by social planners as part of the labour market. Young people in schools are included in such planning because they often decide to stay in school, go on

to higher education, or drop out depending on conditions in the labour market. Rehn noped that eventually adult education would become part of the social insurance system of the countries of the world. He saw advantages to society and to the individual in such a pattern of recurrent education. It would provide for channeling an otherwise "humiliating and degrading" unemployment experience into opportunities for paid educational leave, early retirement, or possibly even paid recreational leave. The unemployed would thereby be kept busy, well fed, and hopeful. Recurrent education could thus remove the possible threat to government of a work force made hostile by economic cycles and by the shift from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive economy. While Rehn held out the hope that a system of lifelong, recurrent education might include the liberal or non-vocational variety of interest to many British adult educators, John Lowe of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development noted that social planners today are most interested in formal education or schooling and in occupational training.

At least one member of the audience in this opening plenary session with Rehn and Lowe questioned the apparent drift. He challenged the concept of using adult education as a counter-cyclical device. He wondered if associating adult education with the Gross National Product and with manpower planning wouldn't destroy the crucially important humanistic quality of British adult education.

Two themes stood out in the discussions of the conference working groups. One was a missionary zeal to "widen the net" of the adult educators tempered by those who urged practitioners to "keep their noses out of people's lives." The other was a tendency to express concern over some of

the evils in society reflected and reinforced by the youth schooling institutions, but then to urge adult educators to adopt some of these very patterns.

The working group considering formal qualifications via adult education represented this tendency to express concern but recommend contrary action. Members of this group made it clear that they wished to cater to "the needs of those with or without ... [formal] qualifications and those who wished or did not wish to acquire them ...." The group expressed its opinion that experience should be accepted in lieu of formal qualifications. It then went on to analyze the situation regarding credentialing, noting the influence of the school system on existing patterns. This led to a reluctant acceptance of examinations as the only realistic way that credentialing by adult educators would be accepted today in a schooling-oriented society. While this would mean that British adult education classes might then include non-credit participants as well as those preparing for the credentialing examinations, no note was taken of the West German Volkshochschule example. Recent introduction there of a Volkshochschule certificate based on examination has led to the affected courses becoming mechanistic preparation for the examinations. Since the examination becomes the be-all and end-all of the course, non-credit students become second-class participants unable to control the direction of the class as was at least possible when non-credit, non-examinable, liberal adult education was also the pattern in Germany.

The group exploring curriculum development and methodology was representative of the split between those who would aggressively enter into "helping relationships" with as many adults as possible and those who worried

lest such an approach might encourage dependency. This group ultimately recommended strongly that adult educators screen any approaches they might take to methodology or program development to ensure that they would avoid imposing dependency relationships upon their adult clients.

The jargon of the innovators achieved high visibility, as in all such conferences on adult education anywhere in the world. There was talk of more short-cycle courses and short-cycle institutions; space-free, time-free, open admission institutions engaged with part-time participants in non-traditional forms of post-compulsory schooling; learning resource centres, independent learners, transferability in a credit system, continuous assessment, ad infinitum. But, so unusual in an adult education conference, the jargon stayed in the background. It was the issues that were discussed.

Participants challenged the assumptions of the conference planners. Some of those present sensed that the organizers of the conference would get excited only about programs for "55-year-old recently arrived unmarried West Indian mothers out of work and just out of prison." The drive for expanded access, they thought, might be simply another fad or panacea promoted by the missionaries of adult education who were ready to gamble the creditable history of British adult education in a questionable dash to involve those who might not wish to be involved. These critics urged adult educators to concentrate on their continuing liberal adult education programs for those who wanted them and on the training programs of "further education" for those who wanted them.

Recognizing the financial crisis in Britain, participants considered whether they should urge re-allocation of existing educational resources to the

adult sector. They realized that the government plans to expand schooling opportunities for 16 to 19-year-olds. This is part of a continuing government policy to extend the school leaving age and to press for comprehensive schooling to mix the economic and social classes. Should adult educators ask the government to reduce its priority for educational provision to the 16-19 age group? Although the issue was discussed, no decision was possible by the conference.

Government interest in industrial re-training and the role of adult educators in this area, so articulately discussed by keynoter Gosta Rehn, was an issue that received considerable thought. Despite the view of one conference working group that adult education should "encourage a critical spirit rather than take the heat off government by shunting the unemployed into a continuing cycle of re-training," the conferees clearly experienced pressure to redefine their traditional terms to include such training within the ambit of adult education. Recurrent education (i.e., adult vocational re-training) was seen as the one area of interest to the conferees to which government might be willing to shift available educational resources in the difficult economic situation facing Britain. This was an economic and political argument that caused the most dedicated administrators of liberal adult education to reconsider their traditional attitude against including training within their mandate.

Despite the seriousness of the questioning of assumptions at this conference, the atmosphere in Britain today clearly threatens liberal adult education. The European context (and the British have now reaffirmed their role as Europeans) is tending to encourage questionable changes in the adult education tradition. Mechanistic, technocratic, and economic

orientations of European adult education are beginning to have influence. "Innovators" in British adult education are seeking to influence the field toward lifelong, recurrent education or schooling. British adult education, one of the last bastions of liberal adult education in Europe, is likely gradually to become mixed with a vocational and credentialing orientation that may sour and overwhelm the non-credit, non-examinable, liberal aspect. As the concept of recurrent or lifelong schooling grows, the outcome could well be that dependency of people upon adult educators so strongly attacked by one of the working groups at the conference. Yet, in this land from which George Orwell issued his warning, there seems to be an "It couldn't happen here" attitude among the advocates of innovation.

An important clue as to whether British adult education may become an influence toward the realization of a Nineteen-Eighty-Four society will be the published report by the organizers of the "Access to Continuing Education" conference. What approach will they take? Will the discussions at the conference have led these thoughtful and highly capable leaders in British adult education to re-think their desire to change the British philosophy of the education of adults? What policies will they recommend, using the conference as platform and justification? Will they seek to preserve the values of non-credit, non-examinable, liberal adult education? Will they seek to blur the distinctions between British adult education and a dependency-prone training approach geared to manpower planning? Will they see that the more "access to continuing education" that is accorded the more likely are dependency of the people "served" and control over them by an increasingly powerful elite? Will they back away from their heavy

promotion of "access"? Will they suggest ways to extend access, prevent compulsion, and avoid dependency? Or will they assume that "access" is automatically a good; that recurrent, lifelong education is advantageous even to those who don't desire it? Will they acknowledge that "access" to "training" can quickly become a requirement that leads to dependency or even to brain-washing? Looked at from this perspective, the "Access to Continuing Education" report may make interesting reading indeed.